

Jesus caricatures the difference in personality and approach between him and John the Baptist: one convivial; the other austere. Once again I find myself reflecting on current circumstances in the light of the Gospel. As restrictions have eased, and as people start to say how they feel about returning to our church buildings, I'm aware of a range of responses. To caricature, there are those who are keen to resume past activities; possibly willing to push the boundaries; maybe dismissive of the restrictions which remain. And then there are those who are much more cautious, preferring to hold back; possibly fearing a second peak. These distinctions are not just a matter of personality, although I suspect personality plays a significant part: some are much more vulnerable to a still-circulating virus. It's not necessarily the case that one or other group is right – within limits, of course: it's possible to be over-anxious or irresponsibly cavalier. But we are being given an increased opportunity to decide what level of risk we are prepared to live with in our daily activities. If you are over 70, or otherwise clinically vulnerable, the Church can ask you to consider your increased level of risk, but you are free to decide that you would like to resume service in church – perhaps just as well, given the age-profile of our office-holders!

There is a certain advantage in having both perspectives present in the population. There are economic and social demands for pubs and restaurants to open. But if nobody dared to patronise them, the initiative would fail – with consequences. On the other hand, if everybody turned out the first weekend, with capacity reduced by social distancing, they couldn't cope. Hopefully with both "early adopters" and "laggards" in the population (as the theory calls them) we'll get a balanced result. It makes me think of butterflies: some species are sedentary in their habits, not straying far from where they emerged – which is why you get colonies. But occasionally individuals turn up miles away from suitable habitat – those genetically inclined to disperse, in search of new territory. If all were dispersers, the colony would break down; but if all were sedentary, the species would be vulnerable to local extinction, through genetic isolation, habitat degradation or climate change.

In the case of Jesus and John the Baptist it's not a case of one or the other, either: their contemporaries should have welcomed both, rather than neither, like those children in the market place. Of course Jesus is greater than John; but in their ministries they offered different perspectives on essentially the same message: the nearness of the kingdom of heaven.

We tend to favour those who are like us, those with whom we are inclined to agree: this is a reminder that those who are different may be bearers of truth for us. Echo-chambers which merely reinforce our own opinions are dangerous. In complex situations like the present we may need contrasting perspectives. In a way the Government is giving us both: even as the Prime Minister announced the easing of restrictions, he warned us of the consequences of lowering our guard and the likelihood of local outbreaks. We have to negotiate our own way between these polarities.

That can be demanding. On the other side of the opening up of parts of the economy are the businesses which are looking for patrons and those who work for them: restaurant-owners and bar staff, for example. Some of them will have less choice about how much risk they are prepared to bear. But all will have the burden of extra work that comes from unfamiliar, additional precautions. Jesus speaks about burdens with his image from the wisdom tradition of a yoke. If we feel burdened, it's worth asking whose yoke is on our shoulders. Some of us are very good at burdening ourselves; some are good at burdening others – is it an oppressive yoke you are carrying? Or is it one that you truly carry for others? – as in caring for a loved one who is chronically ill. We may find our load lightens if we discover its place within the purposes of Jesus and learn from him.

Thanks be to God.

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